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USDA FOREST SERVICE RESEARCH NOTE NE-93
1969

Northeastern Forest
FOREST SERVICE, U. S. DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE, 6816 MARKET STREET, UPPER DARBY, PA.
Experiment Station

SEP 2 1969
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CAMPGROUND MARKETING: THE HEAVY-HALF STRATEGY

Abstract. — When we arrayed camping frequencies in order from the lowest to the highest number of days spent camping per year we found that half of the campers do much more than half of the camping. Campers in this heavy half consistently camp more, year after year, and are increasing their annual participation as well. Heavy-half campers have larger investments in camping equipment; and their annual camping expenditures are nearly three times that of the light half. Heavy-half campers are not strongly bound by preferences or "brand" loyalties for specific types of campgrounds; and therefore, they are a good focus for promotional campaigns.

An advertising budget is most effective when it is concentrated on the specific segments of a market that have the best potential for responding. This is the underlying rationale for product differentiation. That is, different varieties of a single product are marketed; and each variety is keyed to the needs of a specific class of buyers. This is why, for example, automobile makers market a variety of models each year.

But, in the field of family camping, although distinct differences among campgrounds (in services, facilities, activities, and so forth) are becoming increasingly apparent, most campground owners still find they have to appeal to a full range of camper interests if they are to achieve financial success. So, campground owners must find other ways of segmenting the camping market to get the most return from their promotional efforts.

One of the most promising alternatives to product differentiation is the idea of appealing to the heavy user rather than to the average user or to the non-user of camping facilities. Market analysts often find that the distribution of total purchases among persons in a market is sharply skewed: some people buy much more of a product than others do (*Sizzors 1966* and *Twedt 1964*).

An analysis of a *Chicago Tribune* consumer panel (*Twedt 1964*) revealed that of 18 common household products purchased by the panel in 1962 the heavy user half of the panel accounted for 74 to 91 percent of the total reported purchases of every product. The pattern was the same whether the product had a specialized appeal, like bourbon, or more universal usage, like bathroom tissue, soaps, and shampoo. Detailed analysis of the users of these 18 products revealed that their different purchasing patterns *were not* due to pricing practices, nor were they the result of such obvious factors as family income, family size, or living near the store.

That the heavy user buys in greater quantity, with greater frequency, and from a wider array of brands suggests that he is a most promising target for sales promotion programs despite the difficulty in demographically identifying him.

The Camping Market's "Heavy Half"

In a recent cross section survey of New Hampshire state park campers (*LaPage 1968b*) we arrayed the camping families in order of their 1967 camping volume and split the sample at the median, which happened to be 20 days. This procedure revealed that 354 campers (half of the sample) accounted for only one-fourth of the reported 16,500 camping-days; the remaining campers — *the heavy half* — camped three times as much in 1967.

The heavy-half campers, in 1967, also were responsible for the majority of reported camping days in each of the preceding 3 years:

Year	*Reported camping-days*	*Percent done by heavy half*
1964	7,520	68
1965	9,689	67
1966	11,980	72

Not only do the heavy-half campers average more days of camping each year, but their participation is on the increase while that of the light half has remained practically unchanged over the 4-year period studied:

	Average Days Camped	
Year	*Light half*	*Heavy half*
1964	13	26
1965	14	28
1966	12	30
1967	12	34

Table 1. — Predicted average days of camping per year by heavy and light campers at daily fees of $1 to $5

Daily fees	Heavy-half campers	Light-half campers
	Days	*Days*
$1	39	14
2	34	12
3	28	7
4	18	7
5	10	4

Although the average daily expenditures by each group, when on a camping trip, are not greatly different ($11.94 for the light half, and $11.23 for the heavy half), their different participation rates result in a far greater dollar expenditure by heavy-half campers. The average annual expenditure for camping (exclusive of equipment) by light-half campers in 1967 was $143.28; for heavy-half campers it was $381.82.

We found no significant differences in the length of trips taken by heavy and light campers, but the heavy camper averaged 3 times as many camping trips (6 versus 2) during the 1967 camping season. Fifty-three-percent of the light campers went on only one trip during the year, while 61-percent of the heavy campers went on a minimum of five trips.

Because they take more frequent trips and they are exposed to many more campgrounds, heavy campers should be expected to be more sensitive to increasing camping fees. If the daily fee for a campsite were to be increased to $4, heavy campers predicted a 47-percent reduction in their visits to the park system at the same suggested fee level, the light campers predicted a 25-percent reduction. With daily fees as high as $5, both groups would reduce their camping by nearly 75 percent (table 1).

Reaching the Heavy-Half Camper

Like the analysts of the *Tribune's* consumer panel, we found no socio-economic or residential distinctions between light and heavy campers. At this point, the most that we can say about the heavy camper is that, on the average, he has more money invested in camping equipment, he has been camping longer, and he has decidedly less loyalty for specific kinds of campgrounds (tables 2-4).

The question of whether the heavy-half camper is a market segment worth focusing on is clearly answered in the observations that:

- One camping family in the heavy half is equal in purchasing power to three families in the light half.
- Heavy-half campers are less constrained in their campground selections by considerations of "brand" loyalty for specific campgrounds or types of campgrounds.
- Heavy-half campers are more sensitive to fee increases; and, therefore, they may be more responsive to attendance incentives that are based on discount fees (*LaPage 1968b*).

The question of how to reach the heavy-half camper segment is less easily answered. Whether heavy campers are any more likely to buy (and read) camping magazines and guidebooks (and which ones) is a subject well worth further study. Although our study did not focus on camper's sources of information, it did collect some preliminary data on camper decision-making. These data seem to indicate that the heavy-half campers are less likely to consciously deliberate between alternative campgrounds when selecting a place to camp, and they are more spontaneous in their selections. Two-thirds of the light-half campers had decided where to

Table 2. — The distribution of equipment investments by heavy and light campers

Campers	Investment in camping equipment		
	Under $150	$150 to $500	Over $500
	Percent	*Percent*	*Percent*
Heavy half	7	25	68
Light half	30	44	26

Table 3. — The distribution of years of camping experience by heavy and light campers

Campers	Years of camping experience		
	0-2	3-5	Over 5
	Percent	*Percent*	*Percent*
Heavy half	30	27	43
Light half	47	19	34

Table 4. — The distribution of transient visitors, frequent visitors, and exclusive visitors in the New Hampshire state park system, by heavy and light campers

Campers	Transients	Regulars	Loyalists[1]	Total
	Percent	*Percent*	*Percent*	*Percent*
Heavy half	26	57	17	100
Light half	11	41	48	100

[1] In this study, transients were defined as campers who spent less than 15 percent of their 1967 camping at New Hampshire state parks; regular visitors spent between 15 and 89 percent; and loyalists camped almost exclusively (90 percent or more) within the state park system.

camp at least 2 weeks in advance; only 21-percent of the heavy-half campers decided this far in advance.

These findings suggest four possibilities for focusing a promotional campaign on the heavy-half of the camping market. (1) Check the readership surveys of camping magazines to find out what portion of their readers camp more than 20 days per year. Look also at their circulation figures for your part of the country. Generally, the magazines with the highest circulation and the largest proportion of heavy campers will be your best advertising buy. (2) Because the heavy-half camper has a big investment in equipment, he can be reached by campground brochures distributed at outdoor shows and through equipment dealers. (3) Ask your campers, when registering, how many days they camp per year. Then keep a separate mailing list for those who camp 21 days or more. Send these campers extra flyers during the year, particularly during the summer. And, (4) finally, because of the importance of word-of-mouth advertising in camping (*LaPage 1968a*), promotional schemes that are directed towards increasing camper satisfaction may prove to be the best advertising. The heavy-half camper, because he contacts 3 times as many campers per year, can be your most influential advertisement.

Before a fully developed strategy for reaching the heavy half of the camping market can be drafted, we will need to learn more about camping behavior. For example, is light camping a transitional stage to heavier equipment purchases and more frequent camping? Also, how long does the period of heavy camping last and does the frequent camper eventually stop camping abruptly or does he gradually return to a light camping stage?

To answer these and similar questions, the Northeastern Forest Experiment Station is now conducting its own long-term panel study of camper behavior. This panel survey is now entering its last year, and some of its findings should soon be available to campground owners.

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